DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 190 UD 034 976

TITLE	Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates. 2002 Public Education Network/"Education Week" National Survey of Public Opinion.
INSTITUTION	Editorial Projects in Education, Bethesda, MD.; Public Education Network, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	29p.; Introduction by Wendy D. Puriefoy and Virginia B. Edwards. Poll conducted by Lake Snell Perry and Associates. For the 2001 survey, see ED 453 304.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Accountability; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Politics of Education; *Public Education; *Public Officials; *Public Opinion; Teacher Competencies; Teacher Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This report presents information from a national survey commissioned in January 2002 by the Public Education Network and Education Week. The poll examines the attitudes of American voters towards public schools and reveals what they want politicians to do about education once they are in office. Overall, Americans assign great value to public education in the context of the recent economic recession, the war on terrorism, and the upcoming November elections. Education remains a top priority and will be a hot-button political issue in the 2002 midterm and 2004 general elections. Voters believe that quality education for all is a national priority. They care about school quality for practical reasons and out of concern for the community. Public concerns about the economy and education are intertwined. Most people believe that politicians should make education a top priority for financial support in their states. The public emphatically defends education budgets against possible cuts and wants officials to protect education dollars. Voters believe it is time to hold politicians and communities accountable for academic performance and school quality. They feel that school boards and parents have the most responsibility for quality education. Voters also believe that students should be held accountable. They have very consistent views about how to improve public education through teacher quality and equal funding between rich and poor schools. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 464 190

Accountability for All:

What Voters Want from Education Candidates

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Careaga
Public Education Network

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2002 Public Education Network/*Education Week*
National Survey of Public Opinion

UD 034 976

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Public Education Network

Public Education Network (PEN) is the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school reform organizations. Through its 70 local education fund (LEF) members in 28 states and the District of Columbia, the Network serves 6.5 million students in 8,600 schools in more than 300 school districts. Since 1983, LEFs have provided more than $1 billion to improve public education in their communities.

PEN and its member LEFs are dedicated to the proposition that a quality public education is the right of every child, not the privilege of a few. The Network believes that equal opportunity and an informed citizenry are crucial components of a democratic society and that there is a strong correlation between the quality of public schools and the quality of community and public life.

Improving public education is the responsibility of parents, teachers, citizens, elected officials, and communities. The Network advocates for significant change in school funding mechanisms, in curriculum and assessment practices, in teacher development programs, in authority and decision making at the local level, and for public engagement in building relationships between citizens, schools, and the communities they serve.

Education Week

Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education. Produced by the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, based in Bethesda, MD, this independent newspaper is now in its 21st publishing year. *Education Week* is well known for its annual *Quality Counts* report on the state of school reform in the 50 states, as well as for its award-winning coverage of news in the nation's public and private schools.

Table of Contents

Introduction 4

Summary of Key Findings 7

Poll Findings 10

WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM EDUCATION CANDIDATES 10

EDUCATION REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY AFTER 9/11 10

PUTTING POLITICIANS TO THE TEST: NO CUTS IN EDUCATION 13

VOTERS SAY CANDIDATES AND COMMUNITIES ARE BOTH ACCOUNTABLE 18

AMERICANS FOCUS ON TEACHER QUALITY 24

Methodology 28

Introduction

The world changed dramatically on September 11 and, in the days since, Americans have become more focused on security, on their families, and on their core values.

More than ever, we are now a society in search of community, and we believe that quality education and good public schools are essential to strong communities. Quality public schools not only strengthen families, they are engines of economic growth and social mobility. They are essential vital signs, indicating that our neighborhoods are secure and that they nurture all our citizens.

Americans recognize that providing a quality education to all children is vital to our national interests and can be achieved. The public also understands its responsibility to help improve schools, and recognizes the important role schools can play in making life better for themselves and for others in the community.

Americans identify public schools as the most critical public resource in the community. At a time when most states face deep budget cuts, voters want their elected representatives to take concerted action to protect education funding even at the cost of deep cuts to other services they deem essential—services such as healthcare, Social Security, law enforcement, and roads and transportation. As the PEN/*Education Week* poll shows, education far outdistances every other spending priority when the public is asked to identify programs that should be made recession proof. Indeed, there are strong indications that education will be a major political issue in the 2002 midterm elections and in the 2004 general election as well.

This poll underscores the continuing power of education as a core issue in American politics. It shows what voters want from their leaders and how officials can best respond to the public's concerns.

EVERY VOTE IS CRUCIAL

The first law of civics is not "let the other guy do it." Rather, it is a focus on what we all can do, as individuals and as active members of a larger community. Traditional civic responsibilities center on paying taxes, voting, and, for those of us with school-age children, making sure our sons and daughters succeed in school. While Uncle Sam has an agency of enforcers to make sure we pay our taxes, only we as citizens can ensure that our public resources are managed wisely, and only we have the power to elect public representatives who share our overwhelming support for public education.

If education is freedom's classroom, voting is democracy's test. It requires every individual to show up and be counted. One of the enduring lessons of the 2000 presidential election is that every vote is crucial and that voting is not simply a right or a privilege, but an essential obligation that should not be taken for granted.

Every election—from a local skirmish for school board seats to a full-blown presidential campaign—is an opportunity to make our collective voice heard and to focus the attention of public leaders on what matters most to us. Every time we enter the voting booth to pull a lever or punch a ballot, we can measurably influence the quality of education in our communities.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Today it seems all political candidates—whether vying for an office in city hall, a seat in the state legislature, or a chance to go to Washington—claim to be education candidates. But the public has very clear ideas about what education candidates should be doing and how elected officials will be held accountable.

The public defines an education candidate as someone who knows education issues, believes that parents and teachers are the most important decision makers on these issues, and is fully committed to protecting education funding at current levels. Elected officials are under pressure to demonstrate what they can do to improve schools and to show that they are catalysts for improvement, not barriers to change or defenders of the status quo.

We have made a national commitment to hold every student and every school accountable for measurable improvements in learning. Now voters say it is time to hold politicians to an equally high standard. Make no mistake: Politicians who fail to match education rhetoric with education results run the risk of earning an "F" in November.

- **Make Education Funding Recession Proof**
  With 45 states braced for drastic cuts to essential services due to an estimated $50 billion shortfall in revenue, the majority of Americans adamantly oppose cuts to education spending under any circumstances. Aware that elected officials face tough spending decisions, some 80 percent of those surveyed say that their state should make education either a top or high priority for financial support. The strength of public support for education funding outweighs support for all other spending priorities combined. Even senior citizens and people without children rate education funding first among all other state budget priorities. The message to elected officials is clear: "Cut education budgets at your political peril!"

- **Produce Results, Not Rhetoric**
  Whether running for office or serving constituents, elected representatives gain the public's trust by offering engaged day-to-day leadership rather than untested experiments in school reform or grand agendas for change. The public rejects a broad range of visionary programs that would radically transform public schools, including voucher programs or the transfer of school control to mayors or city councils.

  The public expects elected representatives to demonstrate leadership through consistent voting records and through the key actions they take as government officials. Americans want honesty and directness from their leaders and will hold them accountable for what they say and for what they do for public education. Americans don't want politicians to focus energy on glitzy TV advertisements and newspaper endorsements while ignoring the issues that really make a difference in the quality of education.

  Voters know that real education leadership means supporting local decision makers; having a firm grasp of the issues; protecting education budgets; focusing on the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic; and voting across party lines to produce better results in student achievement.

  The public wants candidates who will discuss their education voting records with constituents, set national priorities for education, and visit schools and classrooms regularly. It wants candidates to support quality teaching and focus on the people and the basics that make learning happen—students, teachers, smaller class sizes—rather than on state-of-the-art technology and facilities.

- **Arm Citizens with Better Information**
  Better information on schools and more evidence of elected officials' commitment to education issues are crucial to voters. Americans feel they do not have enough information to make good choices for their children, their grandchildren, or their neighbors' children. Given their high regard for public schools, many people would rather not vote than make a mistake and choose the wrong candidate based on insufficient or inconclusive data.

  Equally important, voters need better information about schools to understand how schools can be improved. They want information about literacy rates, data on teacher qualifications and teacher quality, and statistics on school safety. Voters are also interested in the availability and quality of learning tools, in school budgets, and in the ratings of local schools compared to others in the state. Interestingly, voters are less interested in standardized test scores and information on teacher salaries.

- **Don't "Dumb Down" Democracy**
  When it comes to education, the public recognizes the importance of civic responsibility, including the obligation to pay taxes, to pay attention to resource allocation, and to vote.

  Americans know they have the power to be agents of education reform. They believe there is potential for real progress in improving the quality of education for all children, and they have an abiding faith in the power of the democratic process to bring about positive change in the nation's schools. Voters want more information about the critical issues facing students, teachers, and schools so that they can elect leaders who will do more than simply tell them what they want to hear.

Just as voters are not impressed with the bells and whistles of education reform, they are not impressed with the current political rhetoric on education. They are as suspicious of efforts to "dumb down" the curriculum as they are of politicians who dumb down democracy by talking a good education game but failing to deliver genuine education results.

Americans, nonetheless, are showing renewed optimism in the ability of their leaders to improve public institutions and to strengthen them as foundations of peace and prosperity. The public expects much and will hold elected officials accountable for their campaign promises on education.

Americans believe that schools can improve, that children can rise to new levels of achievement, and that communities will benefit from the process. They have faith in the power of engaged leaders at all levels to improve the quality of education for all children, and they understand that successful public schools require attention from the entire community.

We at Public Education Network and *Education Week* see these poll results as a nationwide call to action for a continuing commitment to public education and to the essential American values and ideals that our public schools embody.

Wendy D. Puriefoy is president of Public Education Network, the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school reform organizations.

Virginia B. Edwards is editor and publisher of *Education Week* and *Teacher Magazine*.

Summary of Key Findings

Public Education Network and *Education Week* have published *Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates* to provide an in-depth analysis of the issues driving American opinion on education and to help voters decide who's for kids and who's just kidding.

The survey reveals which messages about education appeal most to voters and shows what Americans want politicians to do about education once they are in office. It also seeks to measure the value Americans assign to public education in the context of last year's economic recession, the war on terrorism, and the upcoming November elections.

EDUCATION REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY

- ***Education will remain a hot-button political issue*** in the 2002 midterm elections and in the 2004 general election as well. It ranks second only to the economy and jobs on the public's list of most serious concerns, ***even out-ranking terrorism and security and the war in Afghanistan.***

- Americans believe that quality education for all is a national priority. More than 4 out of 5 (85 percent) say achieving this goal is personally important to them, and more than 9 out of 10 (92 percent) say that ***providing all children with a quality education is an attainable goal,*** not a pipe dream. More than three-quarters (78 percent) strongly agree that all communities can and should have quality public schools.

- Americans care about school quality for practical reasons and out of concern for their community. They believe that quality public schools build stronger families (24 percent), improve the local economy (20 percent), and reduce crime rates (15 percent). Equally significant, ***school quality has a profound influence on where Americans live.*** Some 42 percent of Americans say their decisions on where to live were influenced by the quality of schools in the community.

POLITICIANS TO THE TEST: NO CUTS IN EDUCATION SPENDING

- The public's concerns about the economy and about education are intertwined. Aware that elected officials face tough spending decisions, 80 percent of those surveyed say that education should be either a top or high priority for financial support in their states. ***When asked to name one or two priorities that government should shield from spending cuts, 53 percent of Americans cite education and schools. That percentage equals the combined total of all other responses*** to this open-ended question about spending priorities, which included healthcare (18 percent), law enforcement (8 percent), Social Security (6 percent), and the military (2 percent). All major demographic categories—including senior citizens—support education funding over every other spending priority.

- The public emphatically defends education budgets against possible cuts and wants officials to protect education dollars. Americans, however, recognize that in the current economic climate there will be little or no new funding for education, especially at the state level. ***Nearly two-fifths (38 percent) of Americans would make early childhood education either the first or second choice to protect from budget cuts,*** followed by efforts to reduce class size (35 percent), teacher training (32 percent), and teacher pay (25 percent). ***A scant 5 percent believe that providing taxpayer money for private school options will improve the quality of education.***

VOTERS SAY CANDIDATES AND COMMUNITIES ARE BOTH ACCOUNTABLE

- Elected officials have been quick to hold students and teachers accountable for academic performance. Now voters say it's time to hold politicians and the wider community to the same high standards. ***Nearly two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) say a candidate's stance on education is either one of the most important factors or a very important factor influencing their vote. Even 59 percent of those without school-age children agree.***

  Who are the education candidates? Americans feel much more favorably toward candidates who believe that education decisions are best made by parents, teachers, and principals (88 percent); who understand education issues (87 percent); who will protect education from budget cuts (86 percent); and who want education to focus on the basics (86 percent). In contrast, Americans are far less likely to favor candidates who suggest visionary programs without first explaining how they intend to fund and implement them (40 percent), who support vouchers (39 percent), or who favor giving mayors or city councils direct control over schools (38 percent).

- Americans believe that elected officials should be held accountable for school quality. They say voting matters, especially at the grassroots level. ***Roughly three-quarters (72 percent) say their votes in national and state elections, and in local school board elections, have an impact on school quality.*** More than three-quarters (78 percent) say their votes in local elections have impact, and some 43 percent say their votes in school board elections matter a lot.

- ***The public believes that school boards, along with parents who have children in public schools, bear the most responsibility for quality education. Voters also say parents and school boards have the most power to effect change.*** Voters hold students and teachers most directly accountable (30 percent) when individual students fail a standardized test of basic skills. If a substantial number of students fail, voters hold the entire community responsible.

- The public also believes that students should be held accountable. Americans strongly support testing and ***almost three-quarters (74 percent) favor requiring students to pass a basic test of skills to be promoted to the next grade.*** About a quarter of the public (23 percent) believes such tests will help direct assistance to students who need it most. Few Americans (8 percent) are concerned that testing will lead to higher dropout rates. However, roughly one-fourth (24 percent) of the public worries that testing requirements will encourage teachers to "teach to the test."

AMERICANS FOCUS ON TEACHER QUALITY

- Americans have strikingly consistent views about how to improve public education nationwide. In each of the past two polls, nearly one-third of survey participants (29 percent) rated teacher quality as the most important factor in improving student learning, with equalized funding between rich and poor schools as the second most important factor (16 percent). In this year's poll, 15 percent of Americans also cite quality early childhood education for all children as an important factor in improving student learning, 12 percent say reduced class

size, and another 12 percent want all children to be able to read by the fourth grade.

- One reason Americans support quality teaching is that many are teachers or know teachers. ***Three out of 10 Americans (29 percent) are teachers or have close family members who are current or former teachers.*** Survey results indicate this "teacher" group could be a powerful voting bloc; nearly three-quarters say that a politician's education platform plays a major role in their voting choices. In comparison, approximately two-thirds of all Americans say education plays a major role in their voting choices.

- ***When it comes to assessing school performance, voters value information on teacher quality (76 percent) and student literacy (74 percent) the most,*** followed by information about books and other learning tools (74 percent), school budgets (67 percent), comparisons of local schools to other schools in the state (66 percent), and data on school safety (63 percent).

WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM EDUCATION CANDIDATES

Public opinion surveys conducted by leading pollsters and media organizations indicate that most Americans continue to view public education as a top national priority. While the events of September 11, and the uncertain state of the economy and the war on terrorism have dominated the news in recent months, poll results show that Americans want their elected officials to stay focused on the goal of improving the quality of education by moving forward with key reforms and shielding education from impending budget cuts.

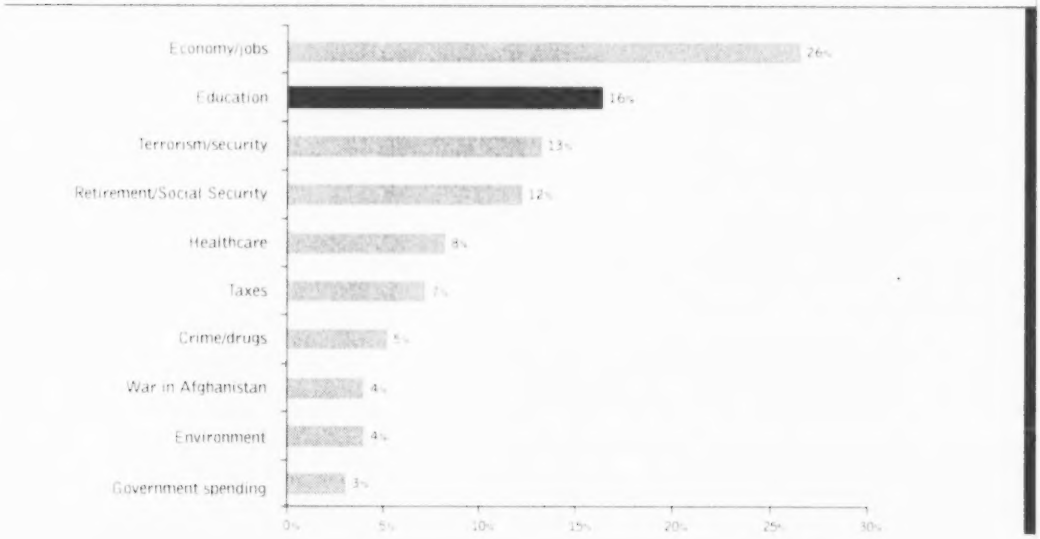
The numbers indicate that education will remain a major political issue in the 2002 midterm elections and in the 2004 general election as well.

EDUCATION REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY AFTER 9/11

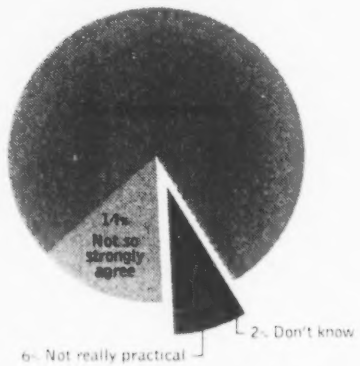
Education Is a Hot-Button Political Issue

In the midst of the worst economic downturn in more than a decade, a war on terrorism, and concerns about domestic security, Americans nonetheless see public education as a top priority, second only to economic recovery. Education rates higher than terrorism and homeland security, the war in Afghanistan, and pressing domestic policy concerns such as taxes, retirement and Social Security, healthcare, and crime and drugs.

The Public's Most Serious Concerns



Do you agree that all communities should have quality public schools, or is that not really practical?



As many surveys have indicated, Americans tend to hold more positive views on efforts to improve education quality in their communities and less positive views on the success of education reform across the nation as a whole.

Americans continue to strongly support the idea that providing a quality education for every child in America is attainable and should be a high national priority. Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans (86 percent) support the idea that quality public education is an attainable objective, and 72 percent strongly agree. Nearly 90 percent view the goal of quality education for all students as extremely important (52 percent) or very important (33 percent) to the nation's future.

Schools May Be Failing, but Quality Education for All Is a Realistic Goal and a National Priority

Americans continue to hold mixed views on the quality of public education nationally and in their communities, but the overwhelming majority believes that we can provide a quality public education to every child.

This year's poll found no dramatic shift in public opinion on school improvement. Thirty-six percent of Americans believe that their local schools have declined, 31 percent believe that schools in their communities have improved somewhat or a lot, and 28 percent believe that the quality of public education in their communities has stayed the same.

I expect every neighborhood, every area of our country, to have...high expectations. I expect every parent to think, "Well, my kid should get the best education there is, regardless of where he or she lives or who they are."

— African-American focus group participant

It's just an essential tool of life. When you think of everyday life, school is right up there. Without [schooling] I don't see how a person could survive.

— Latino focus group participant

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

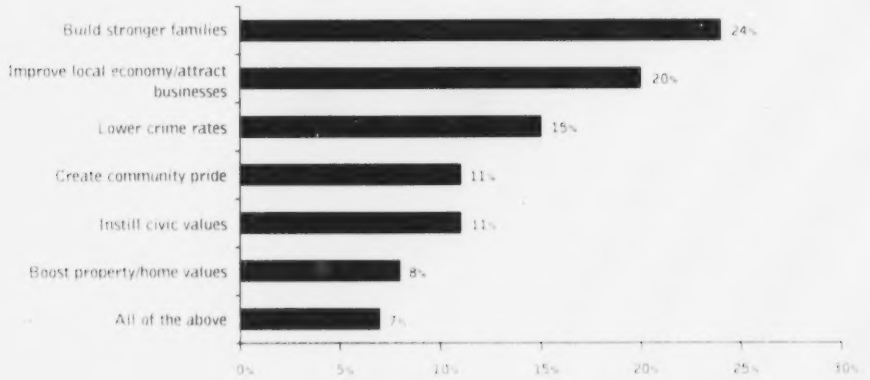
The Value of Public Schools to the Community
Last year's poll found that public schools were the most important public institution in the community, ranking higher than churches or hospitals (public schools: 40 percent; churches: 6 percent; hospitals: 8 percent).

What is it about a public school that makes it the heart of the community and why do so many Americans move to live near quality public schools?

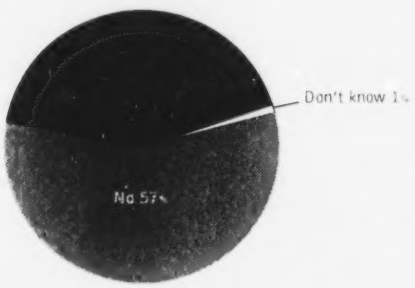
This year's poll shows that Americans believe that good public schools reach out and strengthen families (24 percent), bolster the economy (20 percent), and reduce crime (15 percent). The public also believes that public schools enhance community pride and civic values (11 percent) and raise property values (8 percent). African Americans and Latinos cite quality public schools as a factor in reducing crime more often than whites (20 percent, 25 percent, and 13 percent, respectively).

All voters place building stronger families at the top of the list of the benefits that good schools bring to communities, except for college-educated voters who first look to a school's impact on improving the local economy (23 percent) and then to the ability to build stronger families (21 percent). African Americans react in higher numbers to building strong families (30 percent) than do their white (24 percent) and Latino (20 percent) counterparts. Strikingly, voters with and without school-age children respond in a similar manner.

Benefits Quality Public Schools Bring to the Community



Have you ever chosen a place to live based on the quality of the public schools?



Public Demand for Quality Public Schools

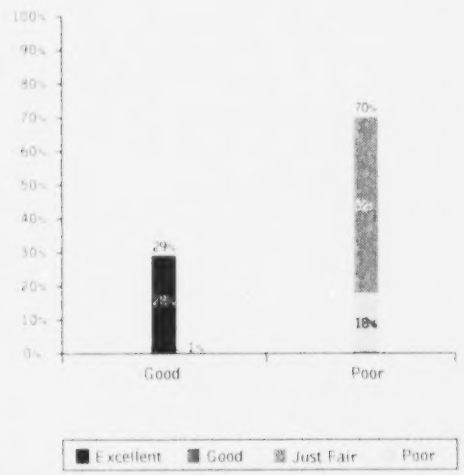
Quality public education is a commodity that Americans desperately want, are willing to relocate for, and are willing to pay more for. Forty-two percent of all respondents said they had chosen a place to live based on the quality of the local public school system.

African Americans and Latinos did not rank education quality as a relocation factor as highly as did their white counterparts (27 percent, 35 percent, and 44 percent, respectively), a finding that may reflect economic and geographic factors that distinguish whites from minorities in general.

PUTTING POLITICIANS TO THE TEST: NO CUTS IN EDUCATION

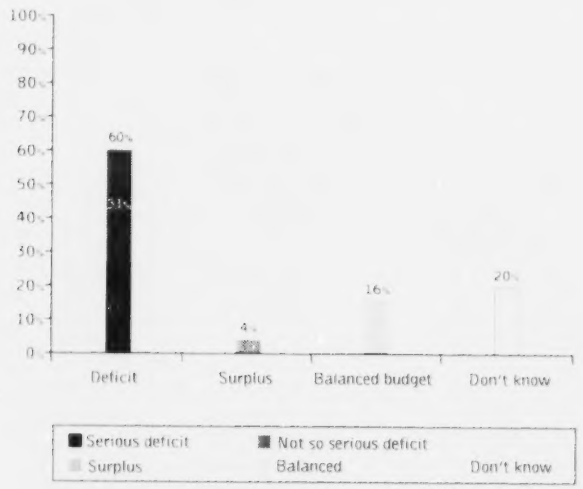
Voters are very aware and deeply concerned that states facing budget deficits also face hard budget decisions. When it comes to funding, the public is most concerned about the effect that the economy and diminishing job security will have on public education. Some 7 in 10 voters think the economy is just fair or poor.

Perceptions of the Economy



Meanwhile, in looking at state budgets, 6 in 10 voters think their state budgets have deficits and 27 percent say these deficits are serious. Only 4 percent think there are any surpluses in their budgets, while 16 percent believe their budgets are balanced. No one thinks any state surpluses exceed single digits. Those who tend to be most pessimistic are whites, the parents of public school students, Westerners, and those between the ages of 40 and 64.

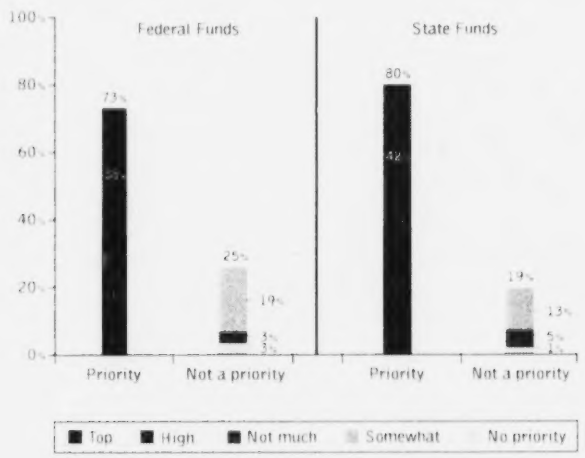
Perceptions of State Budgets



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Education: A Federal and State Budget Priority
With economic cutbacks looming in virtually every state, the public nonetheless wants elected officials to continue to provide adequate funding for public education. Some 80 percent say their state should make education a top or high priority among the major issues competing for financial support.

Education: The Leading Budget Priority

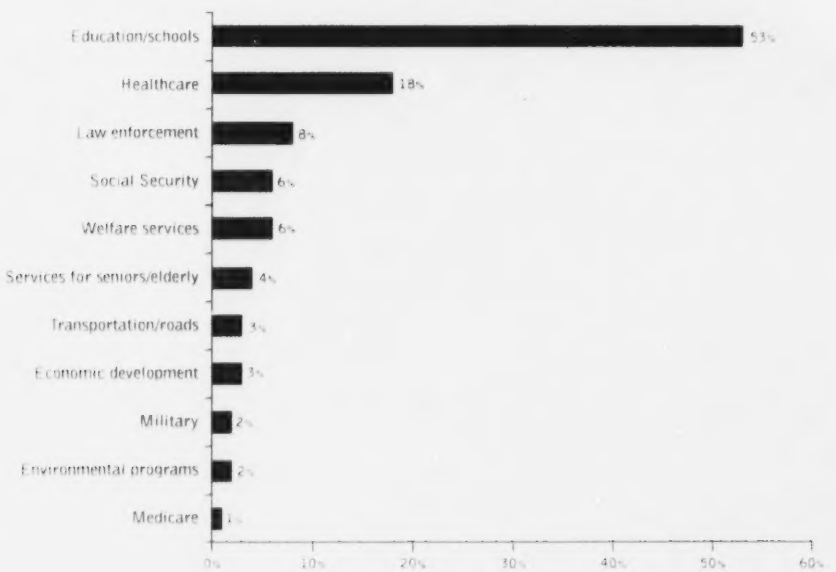


To ensure adequate funding for quality public schools, Americans first and foremost want to protect education spending from cuts. In response to an open-ended question about what one or two programs they want to see protected from state budget cuts, the majority of citizens (53 percent) say education and schools should be the last to get cut. Public support for keeping education funding sacrosanct equals the combined total of all other responses, including healthcare, law enforcement/police/public safety, welfare services, Social Security, and services for seniors.

Support for education funding unites Americans of diverse backgrounds and cuts across major demographic categories of race, age, and gender. While it is not at all surprising that 60 percent of people with children under 18 say education funding should be in a lock box, senior citizens (age 65+) and young adults (age 18–30) also rank education funding as the most important item to protect from the budget ax in the coming year.

Significantly, senior citizens choose education spending (40 percent) over other items that directly impinge on the quality of their lives, including healthcare (24 percent), services for seniors and the elderly (10 percent), and Social Security (8 percent).

State Budget Priorities



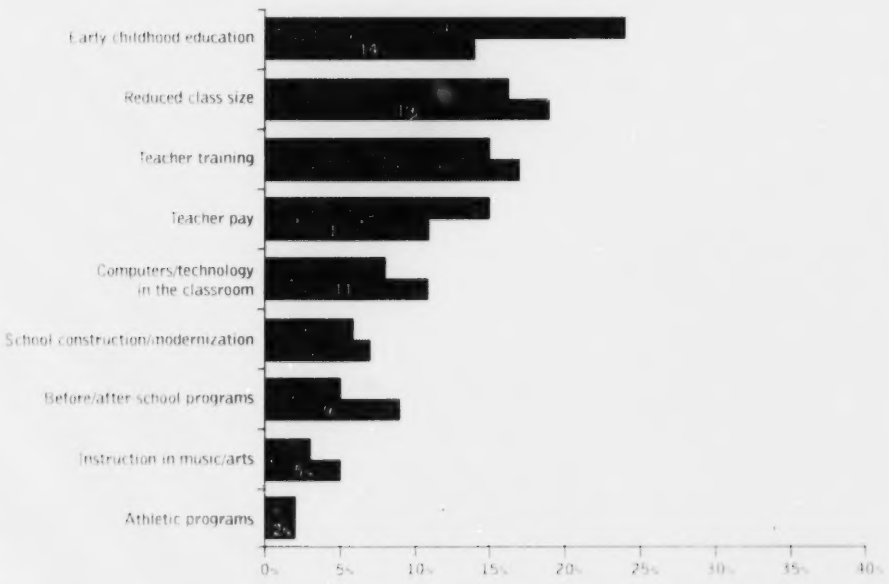
Education Dollar Decisions

The poll findings emphatically demonstrate that the public defends education budgets against possible cuts and characterizes an education candidate as one who will protect education dollars.

The economic reality of today is that there is very little or no new education funding, especially at the state level. When faced with hard budget choices for education, Americans tend to focus on items that support students and teachers in the classroom. Twenty-four percent say it is absolutely essential to protect early childhood education from budget cuts, followed by efforts to improve the quality of instruction, such as a reduction in class size (about 16 percent), increased training for teachers (15 percent), and better teacher pay (15 percent). Americans were far less concerned about school construction and modernization (6 percent), before- and after-school programs (5 percent), and support for athletics (2 percent).

When naming their second choice for priority programs, Americans once again focus on classroom learning and early childhood education as being the most important to protect against budget cuts. Reduced class size tops the list at 19 percent, closely followed by teacher training (17 percent) and early childhood education (14 percent).

Education Dollar Priorities



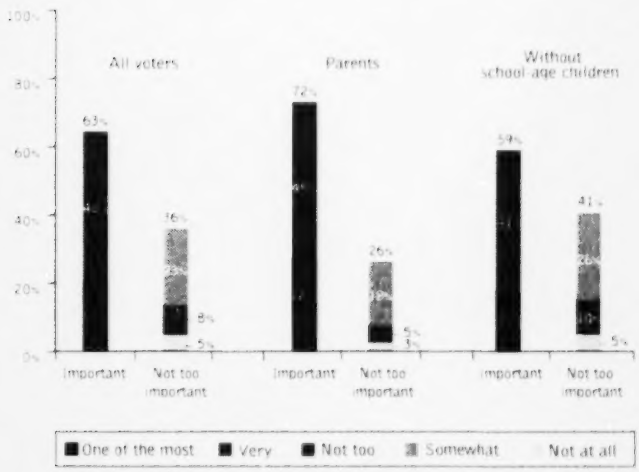
17

VOTERS SAY CANDIDATES AND COMMUNITIES ARE BOTH ACCOUNTABLE

The Public Wants Education Leaders: "Visionaries" Need Not Apply

In every election cycle, candidates vie for public attention and struggle to address key issues. Despite concerns about the economy and terrorism, education remains a top budget priority and a timely issue. Nearly two-thirds of voters (63 percent) say a candidate's stand on education is either most important or very important in their voting decisions. Voters across all demographic groups say a candidate's stand on education is either one of the most important factors or a very important factor in their voting decisions.

Education: A High Priority in Determining Votes

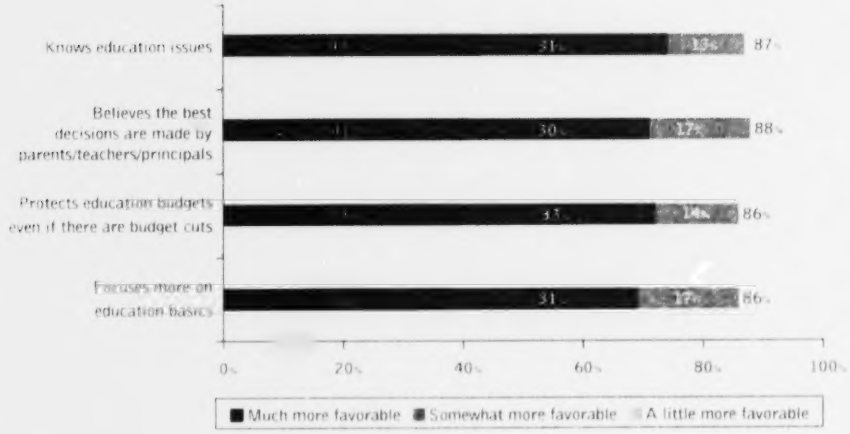


BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Portrait of an Education Candidate

Who is a true education candidate? According to the poll, an education candidate is someone who knows about education issues, believes most decisions should be made by parents and teachers, and will fight to protect education budgets from cuts. Americans want an education candidate who will focus on a curriculum that promotes reading, writing, and arithmetic and who, when it comes to leadership, values consistency and day-to-day voting records over big plans and grand schemes. This is a shift from previous years when the public said it preferred candidates with "vision."

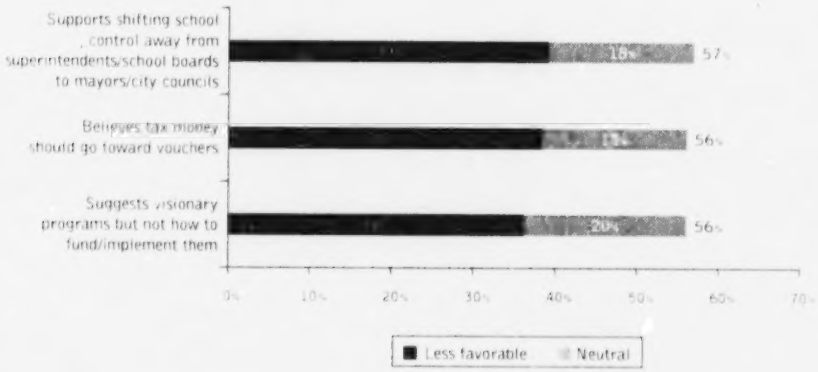
The Public's Education Candidate



Candidates who advocate an overhaul of public education through vouchers, by shifting control of education to mayors or city councils, or by placing school management in private hands receive little support. This lack of enthusiasm for altering the public nature of public education is true for all groups.

Many voters are confident that their votes are being heard by elected officials. Not only do they believe that improving the quality of education is an achievable goal, they also believe that the power of their vote can make a difference, especially at the local level.

Qualities Not Indicative of an Education Candidate



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Roughly three-quarters of Americans say their votes in national and state elections, and in local school board elections, have an impact on school quality. More than two-thirds say their votes in local elections have a similar impact. Some 43 percent of Americans say their votes in school board elections matter a lot.

The public is generally skeptical about those who call themselves education candidates but only spout campaign rhetoric. Less than half of voters (49 percent) believe candidates are being sincere when they call themselves education candidates. Candidates need to prove to the public that they are genuinely connected to the education needs of the community and that they support decision making at the local level.

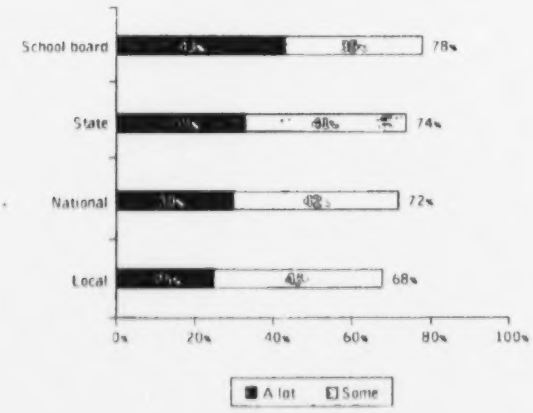
Voting isn't hard. It's knowing who you are voting for and what they represent that's hard. People can say, "I represent this," but once you vote them in they represent something else.

—Latino focus group participant

Politicians are going to [talk about education]—it's something they have to say now. You elect somebody based on the rhetoric that they've said up to the point of election day, and after that, it's just faith or vigilance and cracking down on them and seeing that they're doing their job the way you want it done.

—White focus group participant

Where Votes Matter Most



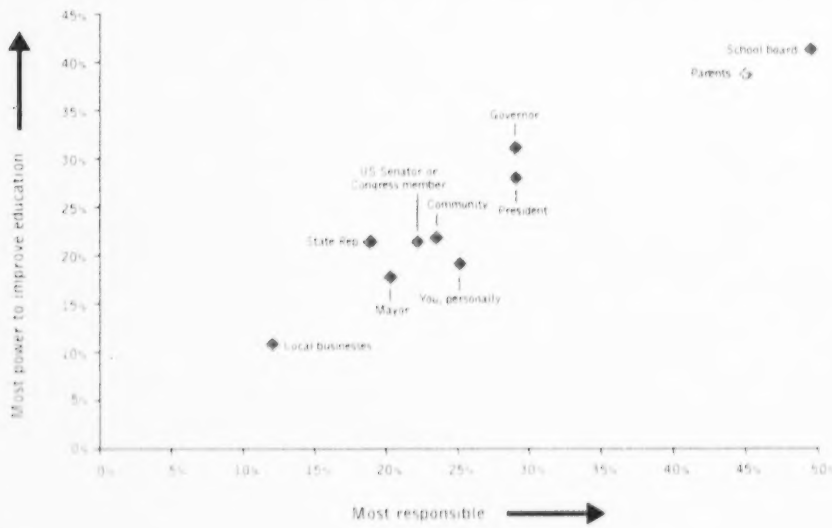
Who Is Responsible?

Respondents were asked who is most responsible for quality education in two ways: Who is responsible and who has the power to improve schools.

The public recognizes parents, students, and local communities as the major consumers and direct beneficiaries of strong public schools. As such, voters believe parents have the most responsibility to communicate their opinions to elected officials. The public also believes that school boards have the most authority on critical education decisions such as funding, curriculum, and teacher hiring practices. Nearly half of all voters give parents and school boards a "10" in terms of most responsibility for education.

At the second tier of responsibility are individuals, the community, and politicians at all levels of government. Given that schools are local, one would think that local political leaders would bear the most responsibility. Americans, however, are looking for education leadership at every level of government. In terms of power to improve education, people still give school boards and parents the most power, followed by the president and then governors.

Who Is Most Responsible for Quality Public Education?



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

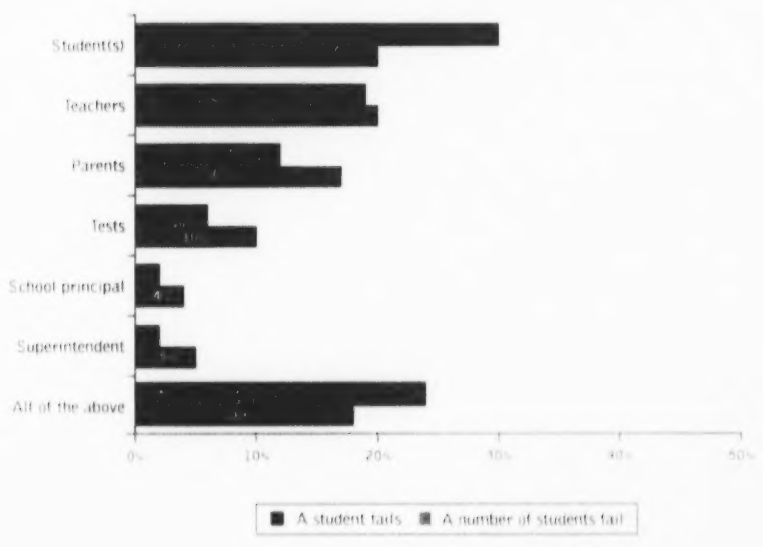
Responsibility for Student Achievement

Voters place the greatest responsibility on the most immediate actors in the learning process, holding students and teachers most directly accountable when individual students fail a standardized test of basic skills. Parents also receive a fair measure of the blame in those instances. For individual failures, the public does not hold tests, the broader public, or anyone else responsible. But if a substantial number of students fail, voters broaden responsibility to include everyone in the community.

The public wants students to be held accountable for achievement. When it comes to grade promotion, Americans support the idea that students must pass a test of basic skills in order to be promoted from one grade to the next. Nearly half of those surveyed strongly support the idea of testing basic skills, while only 8 percent strongly oppose the idea.

However, testing is not a clear cut issue for the public. When asked to identify the most likely result of grade promotion based on a test of basic skills, Americans have mixed views. While nearly 1 in 4 believes that linking grade promotion to testing will help schools direct assistance to students who most need the help, an equal proportion expresses concern that an increased focus on testing will encourage "teaching to the test." While the public expects students to demonstrate mastery of basic skills, the public does not value standardized test scores as an indicator of school quality.

Most Responsible for Student Achievement



AMERICANS FOCUS ON TEACHER QUALITY

Americans remain markedly consistent in their views on what needs to be done to improve the quality of public education across the nation. They zero in on strategies that focus directly on improving the quality of teaching and learning, and a significant number also give priority to efforts that equalize funding between rich and poor schools.

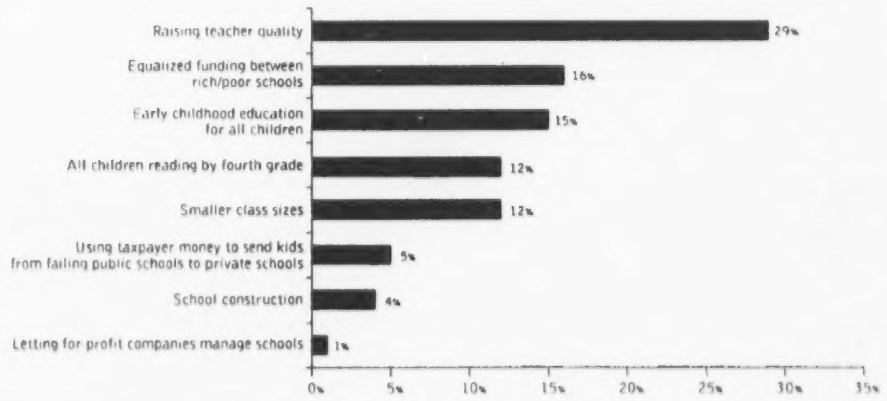
Raising teacher quality remains at the top of the list, a goal that continues to outdistance all other major issues by a wide margin. In the past two years, nearly 1 out of 3 survey participants rated teacher quality as the most important factor in improving student learning.

This year, nearly 3 out of 10 Americans (29 percent) cite improvements in teacher quality as the most important strategy for improving public education, followed by equalized funding between rich and poor schools (16 percent). The public also gives priority to early childhood education for all children (15 percent), smaller classes (12 percent), and ensuring that all children can read by the fourth grade (12 percent).

There is a discrepancy in public education based on what area you live in, so some kids are cut off versus other kids who are living in more affluent neighborhoods....In reality you do need to have a strong local economy [to support good schools]. Now, is this the right way to proceed? No.

—White focus group participant

2002 Top Priorities for Improving Education



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The 2002 survey reveals that only a very small percentage of Americans (5 percent) believe that providing taxpayer money for private school options will improve education quality for disadvantaged students, and only 4 percent identify school construction as a first priority.

Teachers: A Key Constituency

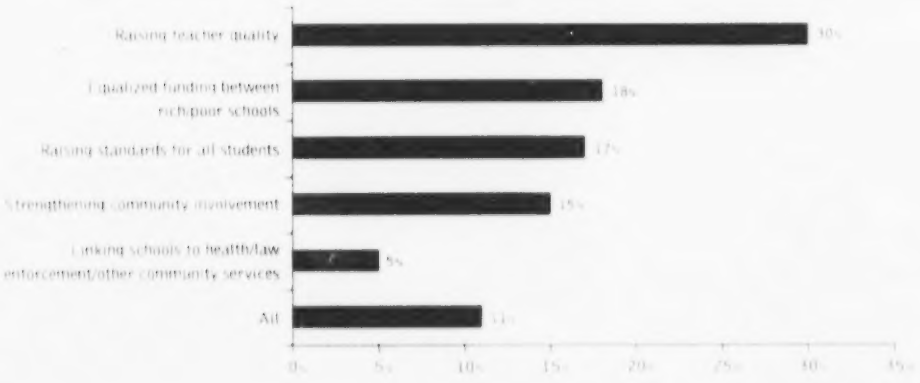
Three out of 10 Americans (29 percent) are teachers or have close family members who are current or former teachers. Poll results indicate that this group is especially focused on the needs of public education and is very interested in what elected officials are doing to improve education quality in the nation.

Indeed, there are indications that this group could be a strong voting bloc on key education issues. Whereas slightly less than two-thirds of Americans say a candidate's stand on education is one of the most important factors in determining their vote, nearly three-quarters of those who teach or have family members who teach say that a politician's education platform plays a major role in their voting choices.

This teacher group is significantly more interested in what leaders have to say on matters of school funding, teacher training and salaries, improvements to facilities, annual testing requirements, and other hot-button education issues. They are also significantly more opposed to the idea of diverting public resources toward private school options than the average voter.

Overall, this group strongly identifies with the need to improve public education in the United States and pays close attention to the specifics of what politicians propose on issues of education reform.

2001 Top Priorities for Improving Education



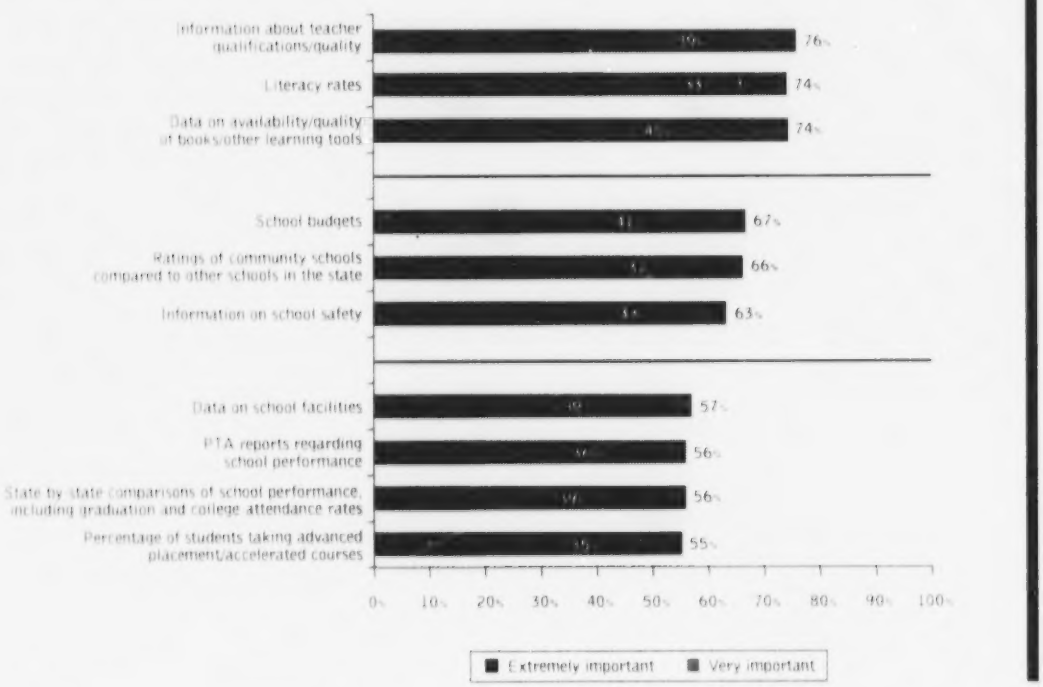
The Public Wants to Know More Before It Does More

Nearly 6 out of 10 survey participants say they voted in their community's most recent school board elections and, when it comes to determining how well local schools are performing, they rate information on teacher quality and student literacy above other major indicators.

By a factor of more than 3 to 1, the public rates information about teacher quality and teacher qualifications as important for assessing the strength of local schools. Almost as many believe that information on literacy rates is essential for measuring school success. Although nearly 3 out of 4 Americans also want information on the availability and quality of books and other learning tools, the intensity of interest in this kind of information is not as strong.

About two-thirds of all voters also express a desire to know more about school budgets, local school performance relative to state standards, and school safety issues.

Assessing the Quality of Public Schools



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Voters also are interested in knowing more about the quality of school facilities, including state-by-state comparisons of school performance, such as graduation and college-attendance rates; PTA reports regarding school performance; and the percentage of students taking accelerated or advanced placement courses. More than half of all respondents think that information on these subjects would be useful to them in assessing local school quality.

Less than half of those surveyed identify standardized test scores as a key measure for evaluating local school quality and, despite the strength of voter interest in teacher quality and teacher qualifications, only 4 out of 10 respondents cited information on teacher pay as an important indicator of local education quality.

If I knew the money was going where it needed to go, then, yes, I would pay more taxes. You get what you pay for, essentially.

—Latino focus group participant

Americans Want Education Reform, Not Education Revolution

Americans believe that improving the quality of education for every child is a crucial priority and an achievable goal. While an overwhelming number of Americans support candidates who will protect education funding, they are distinctly less favorably inclined toward politicians who advocate shifting control of schools away from superintendents and local school boards, and who are willing to divert tax money away from public education into voucher programs and school systems managed by private companies.

Overall, Americans feel it is their right as citizens to demand increased accountability for how their tax dollars are being spent to improve education, and the poll results strongly suggest that they see outside intervention and privatization as direct threats to increased accountability.

The public wants candidates who have clear ideas and concrete proposals for improving education quality and student performance, and for evaluating the results of reform efforts. Americans are skeptical of politicians who suggest radical ideas for overhauling education; they want leaders who give specifics on how they plan to fund and implement new school initiatives.

The bottom line: While the public sees much room for improvement in public education, it values public education as an essential institution that can strengthen families, communities, and the economy. People trust candidates who support education decision making at the local level, as indicated by the fact that 88 percent of those surveyed support leaders who believe that the best school decisions are made by parents, teachers, and principals.

Americans have a strong vision of public schools as a valuable community resource. They want politicians to remain focused on strengthening that resource rather than replacing it with options that are untested, lack credibility, and offer little in the way of accountability to the citizens being served.

Methodology

This national public opinion poll of 1,050 voting-age Americans was conducted by the polling firm Lake Snell Perry and Associates during the week of January 15–21, 2002. The report, which includes analysis of a base of 800 voters with an oversample of 125 registered African-American voters and 125 registered Latino voters, also includes information from three focus groups of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, with and without children. The margin of error is +/- 3 percent. Tables and charts may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Notes